



## Constructing History

*The Use of the Past as a Model for the Present in the Icelandic Sagas*

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*Published in:*  
Collegium Medievale

*Publication date:*  
2010

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Jørgensen, M. R. (2010). Constructing History: The Use of the Past as a Model for the Present in the Icelandic Sagas. *Collegium Medievale*, 23, 5-32.

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# Constructing History:

## The Use of the Past as a Model for the Present in the Icelandic Sagas<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL RIBER JØRGENSEN

The Icelandic sagas can be read and interpreted in many ways. This article examines the sagas both as literary expressions of a longstanding oral tradition and as part of a collective and cultural memory. The focus in the first part is on people and places in the sagas as “realms of memory”: things that help construct a common past and a common identity. The second part of the article explores the role of the sagas in medieval Iceland as “key myths” that explain the origin and uniqueness of a society, and as moral and legal role models legitimizing the current social order.

“Then he said, ‘What about Sturla the Icelander – will you entertain us?’ ‘If you like,’ said Sturla. He then told the Saga of Huld, better and with greater knowledge than any of the present company had heard it told before”.

*Sturlu þáttur*<sup>2</sup>

In *Sturlunga saga* we find the story of Sturla Þórðarson, an Icelander who in 1263 comes to the court of Magnús lagabætir in Norway and is invited to join the king on his ship. In the evening stories are being told and the newcomer is asked to entertain the crew.

This is one of the few examples from the saga literature itself of sagas actually being performed orally, but it is very informative. One might think that the audience chose the outsider Sturla in the hope of hearing a new story, unknown to them, but instead he tells them a story that everyone already knows. It is the *way* he tells the story that is important. The performance itself becomes interesting because the content is already a part of the collective memory.

The example provides an important insight into a very central aspect of Icelandic saga literature: its collective nature. By viewing the sagas as stories that have lived

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the second part of my MA dissertation with the same title, accepted at the Institute of History and Area Studies, Aarhus University, February 2008. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotes etc. are my own.

<sup>2</sup> *Sturlunga saga* 3: 377, Þá mælti hann: “Sturla inn íslenzki, viltu skemmta?” – “Ráð þú,” segir Sturla. Sagði hann þá Huldar sögu – betr ok fróðligar en nökkurr hafði fyrr heyrtr, er þar váru.

and evolved in the oral tradition for centuries before being written down, rather than literary products of the imagination of individual authors, we can achieve a much better understanding of the role of the sagas in medieval society and how these stories about the past helped create and shape a common identity in a relatively young nation such as medieval Iceland.

### The social frameworks of memory

The very idea of memory as a collective phenomenon rather than an individual one was first put forward by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Though his ideas may not seem revolutionary today, in his own time he was one of the pioneers within his field. In the essay “Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire”,<sup>3</sup> and in his posthumous work with the fitting title *La mémoire collective*,<sup>4</sup> he presents his theories which can be seen as a kind of social constructivism. His four main points are these:

- (1) Memory is a socially *constructed* reality, created and maintained by a group. Therefore it makes no sense to talk about individual memory. On the other hand, there are as many different memories in a society as there are social groups – and different groups can (and will) remember the same things in different ways.
- (2) Memory is a *social* phenomenon: One is always under the influence of one’s group, even if one is separated from the group. Consequently, even completely individual, personal experiences are remembered through the structures in the group to which one belongs.
- (3) Memory, by definition, is *selection* – and what is included in the memory is just as important as that which is excluded and forgotten.
- (4) Memory is tied to the *physical* space: specific geographical locations such as memorials and other places with special significance for the group.

Considering the second point first, Halbwachs does not separate individual memory from collective memory. Rather, his distinction is between what he terms *experienced* and *institutionalized* memory.

The *experienced*, *communicated*, or *autobiographical* memory is the personal memory, the kind one has experienced oneself – but it is still collective because the indi-

<sup>3</sup> Halbwachs 1925.

<sup>4</sup> Halbwachs 1950.

vidual can only remember through the prerequisites given to them by the collective: “There is no possible memory outside those frameworks used by the people living in the society in question to fix and retrieve their memories.”<sup>5</sup>

The *institutionalized, historical, or transmitted* memory is, as the name implies, transmitted by others. It is the common memory of the collective, despite – or perhaps because of – the very fact that none of the members of the collective have experienced it themselves. This is where points 1 and 3 above come into play: all memory is a *construction* of the past, not a *re-construction* – and, most importantly, a construction that is created and shaped by the collective.<sup>6</sup>

This construction of the past is, first and foremost, a means by which the group defines itself. A group will define itself by highlighting, on the one hand the internal *homogeneity* of the group – what makes the group a group in the first place – and, on the other hand, its *uniqueness*: the features that separate this particular group from others. It will also create a temporal dimension or *chronology*. This is where the construction of the past comes in, and especially the selection.

But who, then, is responsible for this selection and construction? The answer, according to Halbwachs, is the people who hold the power in any given society, because they have a “monopoly” on the past. He uses as an example the early days of Christianity and speaks of an almost Hobbesian “state of nature”, a “live memory” (not to be confused with “living memory” – see below). At this early stage, memory is truly collective: everyone can remember and, more importantly, everyone can remember on equal terms. There really is no divide between past and present – in fact, no “past” at all as we understand it. Jesus and his contemporaries, although long dead, are still very much present. This state Halbwachs limits to the first couple of centuries A.D.: “At that time, no distinction was really made between memory and consciousness of the present.”<sup>7</sup>

In the next phase, memory slowly becomes *tradition* – this is where construction comes in. This phase, according to Halbwachs, occurs in the third and fourth centuries and leads into the third phase: *specialization* and *monopolization*. The specialists (in this case the priesthood) become the only members of society to deal with the

<sup>5</sup> Halbwachs 1985: 121, “Es gibt kein mögliches Gedächtnis außerhalb derjenigen Bezugsrahmen, deren sich die in der Gesellschaft lebenden Menschen bedienen, um ihre Erinnerungen zu fixieren und wiederzufinden.” The German translation has been used here, as the English translation (1992) is an abridged version.

<sup>6</sup> Halbwachs 1985: 385.

<sup>7</sup> Halbwachs 1985: 262, “Zu jener Zeit unterschied man [...] schwerlich zwischen dem, was Erinnerung, und dem was Bewusstsein der Gegenwart war.”

past. Little by little, they obtain a monopoly on the interpretation of the Scripture and the creation of new texts, as well as on what is “forgotten”. What does not fit the dogma is conveniently left out, and those parts of the past that are chosen for preservation are put into a fixed form: they are ritualized.

As opposition to this definition of tradition as static transmission Halbwachs proposes *history*: the positivistic attempt of modern scholarship to create a synthesis that is changeable and free to evolve. The emphasis here is on the word *modern*. Halbwachs does not see anything in those ancient times, his primary subject of investigation, which could be compared to “history” in the modern sense.

Turning our focus back north, do Halbwachs’s three phases apply to the case of medieval Iceland? The first phase, “live memory”, would have to be the purely oral period – the “Saga Age”, ca. 860–1030 – and the century that follows. With the introduction of (Latin) literacy and the writing down of the sagas from the earliest attempts in the twelfth century we gradually enter the second phase in which memory becomes tradition. This phase continues at least until the breakdown of the commonwealth in the 1260s, if not beyond that.

The third phase, specialization, is, however, much more difficult to detect. There is not much evidence to support the theory that the transmission of the saga tradition – orally or in writing – was ever the sole property of an elite group, and certainly not a religious one. Oral tradition, by its very nature, is universal: you might be able to keep people from learning the alphabet, but you can’t stop them from telling each other stories.

With the introduction of writing, at first it was of course only those who could read and write who were able to use the new medium, and the earliest Icelandic texts were indeed learned “historical” works, written by members of the clergy. Ari Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók* is dedicated to his employer the bishop, and *Landnámabók* is often contributed to Ari as well.<sup>8</sup> Both texts are clearly meant to be good Christian works, with *Íslendingabók*’s placing of the Christianization as the defining event in Icelandic history<sup>9</sup> and *Landnáma*’s emphasis on Iceland as an empty piece of land but with an inherent Christian potential, and the settlers as “noble heathens”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1977: 12.

<sup>9</sup> “Íslendingabók”, in: *Íslendinga sögur* 1. The central chapter 7 (pages 8–12), concerning the acceptance of Christianity at the Alþingi in the year 1000, is by far the longest.

<sup>10</sup> *Landnámabók*, in: *Íslendinga sögur* 1: 21–241. See especially the opening chapters (pp. 23–25). Wellendorf (2010: 21) takes a literary approach to *Landnáma* and argues that, by using a “mythic” rather than a “historiographical” mode, the book is able to deal with the pagan past without having to explain or condemn it to a contemporary Christian audience.

The sagas, in comparison, seem to have been very much common property in their written forms, just as they must logically have been when transmitted orally. When Árne Magnússon travelled around Iceland in the early eighteenth century, collecting manuscripts, he didn't find them in churches – he found them on the farms spread all over the countryside.<sup>11</sup> The sagas were preserved and used by “ordinary” people, not by specialists belonging to a certain social group, as we saw it in the case of Sturla Þórðarson.

That being said, it must have been primarily the big chieftains who could afford to have manuscripts made, and there were obviously some who were better storytellers than others – but, contrary to the situation on the continent, if anything it was the *secular* top branch that preserved tradition, not the church. The church in Iceland never achieved the kind of hold on the population, economically or intellectually, that it had in most of Europe throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> Not until after the Reformation was a church established that was strong enough to dominate (if still not monopolize) tradition. Thus the development in Iceland was almost exactly opposite to that on the continent.

Some (e.g. Magerøy) have claimed that sagas which openly criticize chieftains might have been written in monastic milieus.<sup>13</sup> However, Magerøy specifically uses *Bandamanna saga* as an example, and that particular saga is not really critical against chieftains in general. More than anything it functions as a legal *exemplum* (cf. the section on “the legitimizing saga” below). If it is critical against certain named chieftains, that just serves as an indication that the saga represents a specific clan's point of view rather than some sort of monastic anti-secular agenda.

Halbwachs's idea about memory as a collective phenomenon, on the other hand, fits the sagas very well. The stories that are retold in the written sagas can, in their oral form, be looked upon as a unit, a common fund of story material that was never performed in its entirety but only as shorter episodes (corresponding, in the written form, with single saga “acts” or the “short stories” known as *þattir*). However, the audience would have known the rest of the story from other performances and were therefore able to put the episodes into a larger context, as in the example of Sturla above – in Carol Clover's words: the “immanent whole”.<sup>14</sup>

This notion that the sagas were not the property of a specific author but belonged to and were shaped by the collective corresponds very well with Halbwachs's defini-

<sup>11</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen 1977: 126.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Byock 2001: 297–98, Meulengracht Sørensen 1977: 67–70.

<sup>13</sup> Magerøy 1957.

<sup>14</sup> Clover 1986: 23–24.

tion of collective memory. The past belonged to the collective, as did the stories told about the past. In fact the two are, to all intents and purposes, indistinguishable: the past *is* the stories. The immanent whole and collective memory are two aspects of the same phenomenon.

### Realms of memory

The idea of distinguishing “history” from “tradition” was carried on by Halbwachs’s compatriot, historian Pierre Nora. According to him, memory is not just a perfect rendition of the past – and that is exactly what sets it apart from history (in the scholarly sense). Nora describes the differences thus:

Memory is life, [...] History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, [...] Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it. [...] History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. [...] Memory is blind *to all but the group it binds* [...] History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one [...] Memory is *absolute*, while history can only conceive the *relative*.<sup>15</sup>

This distinction between “history” and “memory” corresponds very well with Halbwachs’s “history” vs. “tradition”.

Like Halbwachs, Nora emphasizes the purpose of memory: it helps define the group from which it originates. Furthermore, as opposed to history, which belongs to all of us, memory is specific to the group – although groups can of course overlap.

Most scholars today would probably agree that Nora’s definition of history no longer holds up to closer scrutiny; the idea of history as an absolute “truth” that can be subjectively deduced has long ago been dismissed. Where Nora really adds to Halbwachs’s theories, however, is by coining the term *realms of memory*<sup>16</sup> – “realm” or “lieu” in the broadest possible sense as it includes events (factual and mythical), symbols, and people as well as actual physical locations – basically anything that can bring together the collective surrounding a memory and at the same time say something about what is remembered.

<sup>15</sup> Nora 1989: 8–9.

<sup>16</sup> Expanded upon in Nora’s three volume work (1984–92). A good overview of Nora’s theories can be found in chapter 1, “Memory’s Remains: Les Lieux de Memoire”, in Wood 1999: 15–39.

Nora defines three main types of realms of memory in his French case study based on national communities, but they can be used in a much broader sense:

- (1) Realms concerning *conflict*: geographical borders, relations to other nations, etc.
- (2) Realms concerning *consensus*: monuments, museums, important historical characters and defining events for the nation, etc.
- (3) Realms concerning the *community*, especially through repetition: holidays, memorials, rituals, songs and stories, etc.

All three categories are very suitable as a continuation of Halbwachs's theories about the collective nature of memory and how memory is transmitted.

### Icelandic realms of memory

If we turn once again to the sagas, the examples are legion. We find three kinds of realms of memory in particular:

- (1) *Places* as realms: Places in the landscape named after people, events, etc.
- (2) *People* as realms: Memory connected to (semi-)historical people: settlers, notable chieftains, skalds, etc.
- (3) *Past events* as realms: Memory connected to significant events, historical or not.

The first category, which could also be called “popular etymology”, is by far the most numerous. Most every single saga has at least one anecdote about how a certain location got its name, and most of them are built on the same formula. A few examples will serve as illustration here.

A very common kind of popular etymology is places named after people. They can be found in all Sagas of Icelanders, but especially in the ones that begin with the *landnám*, when the settlers come to Iceland and name locations in the area after themselves, as done by Björn austræni at the beginning of *Laxdæla saga*:

**Björn** then claimed all the land between the Stafá river and Hraunfjörð and lived in the place that was later known as **Björn's Haven**.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Íslendinga sögur* 4: 3–4, Siðan tók **Björn** sér þar land allt á millum Stafár ok Hraunfjarðar ok bjó þar, er siðan heitir **Bjarnarhöfn**.



Events can inspire place names as well. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, Ingimundr Þorsteinsson comes to Iceland and travels around to find the place where he is meant to settle. On the way he passes a number of as yet unnamed places:

“And on the day when they travelled along the fjord, two sheep came running toward them from the mountain; they were **rams**. Ingimundr said: ‘It is fitting that this fjord should be called **Ram’s Fjord**.’ After they had arrived in the fjord it became very foggy. They came to a bank where they found a big **board** that had recently washed ashore. Ingimundr said: “It seems to be destined that we are to give these places lasting names, so let us call this bank **Board Bank**.’ Summer was coming to an end as they were carrying many goods and had been late in leaving. Winter was almost upon them when they came to a valley filled with **willow** trees. Ingimundr said: ‘Many willows grow in this valley. Let us call it **Willow Valley**, and I think we should set up camp here for the winter.’”<sup>18</sup>

While it seems very plausible that Viðidal actually had willows growing in it when it was first settled, the authenticity of the event with the rams is doubtful. That does not mean that the *story* as such can’t be authentic, though, in the sense that such an anecdote could easily have been transmitted for centuries among Ingimundr’s descendants – and whether true or not the story serves its purpose: to explain how the fjord got its name. Thus the story became “true” for a medieval audience, if not in an absolute, objective sense.

As for the custom of naming one’s farm after oneself, there is no reason to think that this might not be a real tradition. In a culture that places such a high value on genealogies and the right to land, it seems a perfectly logical move for a family to tie the founder – and through him all his descendants – to the farm and the land. A family that had actually lived in the same place for centuries would have every reason to underline its connection to that place. On the other hand, a family of (relative) newcomers would have just as much reason to “invent” a tradition to justify their claims to the land. The farm in itself becomes a realm of memory, as well as the person after whom it was named, whether historical or not.

<sup>18</sup> *Íslendinga sögur* 7: 36, Ok um daginn, er þeir fóru með þeim firði, þá hljópu ór fjalli at þeim tveir sauðir. Þat váru **hrútar**. Þá mælti Ingimundr: “Þat mun vel fallit, at þessi fjórðr heiti **Hrútafjórðr**.” Síðan komun þeir i fjórðinn, ok gerði þá þoku mikla. Þeir kómu á eyri eina, fundu þeir þar **borð** stórt nýrekit. Þá mælti Ingimundr: “Þat mun ætlat, at vér skylim hér örnefni gefa, ok mun þat haldast, ok köllum eyrina **Borðeyri**.” Þá leið á sumarit, því at margt var at færa, en farit síð, ok kómu nær vetri í dal þann, er allr var **viði** vaxinn. Þá mælti Ingimundr: “Sjá dalr er mjök viði vaxinn. Köllum hann **Viðidal**, ok hér ætla ek líkast til vetrsetu.”

The use of people as realms of memory is seen most clearly in the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*) where the famous heroes from the Sagas of Icelanders are regularly mentioned as role models, one way or another. Sometimes they even show up themselves, in dreams or the like. In *Íslendinga saga* Snorri Sturluson takes over the farm Reykholt from his uncle and plans to move there from his current residence at Borg – Egill Skallagrímsson's old farm. Egill then appears in a dream to his own relative and namesake who works for Snorri:

“A man was named Egill Halldórsson, of the Mýri men's kin. He was in Snorri's employ at the time when he was considering these matters. Egill dreamt that Egill Skallagrímsson came to him and was very unfriendly. He said: “Is our relative Snorri considering leaving here?” “So it is said,” said Egill. “Yes, he is about to leave, and that is a bad idea,” said the dream man, “for seldom have people been able to put demands to us men of Mýri when we were prosperous, and he shouldn't look down upon these lands.”<sup>19</sup>

Here, Egill Skallagrímsson is used to criticise Snorri's behaviour because the two are joined both by blood and through their connection to the farm Borg. He becomes the voice of reason that warns Snorri about his impending doom. In this way, Egill becomes a realm of memory: the voice from the past comments on the present.

Dream omens are a not uncommon phenomenon in most saga subgenres, but whereas dreams in the Sagas of Icelanders are usually more intangible and require a certain amount of interpretation, in the contemporary sagas we see these well-known characters show up to make their often very straightforward contributions.

Another, more indirect, example of this use of people as realms of memory can be found later in the saga when Snorri is sitting in his outdoor pool with some associates, discussing who are the greatest chieftains in Iceland:

People said that there was no chieftain quite like Snorri, and that no other chieftains could match his powerful family connections. Snorri admitted that

<sup>19</sup> *Sturlunga saga* 2: 22, Maðr hét Egill Halldórsson. Hann var af Mýramanna langfeðgum. Hann var heimamaðr Snorra, þá er hann var í þessum ráðbrotum. Egill dreyndi, at Egill Skallagrímsson kæmi at honum, ok var mjök ófrýnligr. Hann mælti: “Ætlar Snorri, frændi várr, í brott heðan?” “Þat er mælt,” segir Egill. “Brott ætlar hann, ok þat gerir hann illa,” segir draummaðrinn, “því at lítt hafa menn setit yfir hlut várum Mýramanna, þá er oss tímgaðist, ok þurfti hann eigi ofsjónum yfir þessu landi at sjá.”

his sons-in-law were no small men. Sturla Bárðarson had kept guard by the pool and walked Snorri home. He casually uttered this half-verse, making sure that Snorri heard it:

“You have relatives  
Like the word-wise king  
Long ago in Lejre  
Injustice will even itself out.”<sup>20</sup>

This time it is Snorri’s bodyguard who delivers the unpopular truth: his three sons-in-law are too strong, and they will eventually trigger his downfall. At this time Snorri was already involved in a feud with one of them, Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr. The other two, Gissur Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn ungi, later became his mortal enemies, and Gissur ended up having him killed. The saga episode becomes a general warning against making enemies of your relatives, especially if they are too strong for you, and the warning is delivered in the form of a comparison with “the word-wise king in Lejre”, i.e. Hrólfr kraki, who was killed by his brother-in-law after having deceived him.<sup>21</sup>

### Cultural memory, communicative memory

Even though quite a few scholars over the years have been inspired by Halbwachs and applied his theories indirectly, he went partly out of fashion – at least until 1992 when German Egyptologist Jan Assmann’s book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* appeared. An important book, not just for reviving Halbwachs but mainly for taking the next step and dealing with the *transmission* of memory – something that Halbwachs’s theories were lacking and a subject the surface of which had barely been scratched before.

Assmann acknowledges the ideas of Halbwachs as well as modifying them a bit. The past doesn’t “exist” as such – it only comes into existence when we relate to it. Assmann defines four kinds of memory:<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Sturlunga saga* 2: 154–55, Sögðu menn, at þá var engi höfðingi slíkr sem Snorri ok þá mátti engi höfðingi keppa við hann fyrir sakir mægða þeira, er hann átti. Snorri sannaði þat, at mágar hans væri eigi smámenni. Sturla Bárðarson hafði haldit vörð yfir lauginni, ok leiddi hann Snorra heim, ok skaut hann fram stöku þessi, svá at Snorri heyrði: “Eiguð áþekkt mægi | orðvitr sem gat forðum, | ójafnaðr gefsk jafnan | illa, Hleiðrar stillir.”

<sup>21</sup> *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* 1: 43–44 and 93–105.

<sup>22</sup> Assmann 1992: 20–21.

- (1) *Mimetic* memory: “Learning by doing”. The past is kept alive by the younger generations learning from their elders, and especially in earlier times that happened by literally watching and mimicking.
- (2) *Physical* memory or “the memory of things” (“Das Gedächtnis der Dinge”): Memory tied to physical objects and places. This provides continuity and, in a very real sense, makes the past become present. The parallels to Halbwachs’s “physical space” are obvious.
- (3) *Communicative* memory: The creation of a collective identity through social interaction. The past is transmitted by the collective and therefore one’s perception of the past is undeniably influenced by that collective – and one can *only* perceive within the social mindset to which one belong (cf. Halbwachs’s idea of memory as a social construct).
- (4) *Cultural* memory or “transmission of meaning” (“Überlieferung des Sinns”): The past can never be recreated perfectly and objectively – it is more a matter of transmitting a meaning (symbolic or concrete) rather than actual historical events.

### The contents of memory – the floating gap

Whereas Assmann’s former two categories concern the *manner* in which one remembers, the latter two deal with the *contents* of this memory (even though the two can be difficult to separate). Assmann’s main concern is the contents, and in this he relies on Belgian anthropologist Jan Vansina’s studies of the concept of history in contemporary oral cultures in central Africa.

Vansina distinguishes between the *recent* and the *distant* past. The last two or three generations constitute the recent past, while the distant past is the mythical prehistoric era. Both are richly described in these cultures, but in very different ways. The memory of the recent past is literally “living memory”: it is transmitted by the people who experienced it themselves. The distant past is concerned with origin: all peoples have an inherent need to explain where they came from and how.

In between these two periods we find what Vansina terms the *floating gap*: a period that is lost in the currents of time and of which very few or no records exist. This “floating gap” is floating because it moves in time: it always goes up to right before the recent past and always stretches back indefinitely, while the distant past is placed in some sort of timeless vacuum.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Vansina 1985:23–24.

Vansina introduced the floating gap as a modification to the (then) standard anthropological model which also had three main periods:

- (1) The timeless, mythical distant past – its function: to explain the origins of society.
- (2) A “repetitive or cyclical middle period”, meant to justify the workings of present-day society and provide a static model of the same.
- (3) The recent past, describing contemporary society and often focusing on social upheaval and the effects thereof.

According to Vansina, this model does not quite fit the cultures he studied in Africa, since the middle period is so bereft of information. His floating gap can, however, be inserted between periods 2 and 3, although that does not explain the puzzling lack of stories about it.

If we compare this model to Sigurður Nordal’s three saga types<sup>24</sup> as well as the most commonly accepted standard genres, the similarities are easily recognised:

<i>Jan Vansina</i>	Distant past	“Middle period”	<i>The floating gap?</i>	Recent past
<i>Sigurður Nordal</i>	Sagas of ancient times (“Oldtidssagaer”)	Sagas of the past (“Fortidssagaer”)		Contemporary sagas (“Samtidssagaer”)
<i>Standard model</i>	Legendary sagas ( <i>Fornaldarsögur</i> )	Sagas of Icelanders ( <i>Íslendingasögur</i> )		Contemporary sagas ( <i>Samtíðarsögur</i> )

The most striking point when comparing Vansina’s empirical findings with the Old Norse material is the fact that here we find a similar “gap” between the “middle period” and the recent past, i.e. between the Sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas; a period of almost a century in which no – or only very few – stories take place, at least none that have been transmitted to us.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Sigurður Nordal 1953.

<sup>25</sup> See the conclusion, below, for more on this “fixed gap” in the Old Norse material.

Assmann, to some extent, adopts Vansina's model in his distinction between communicative and cultural memory. Communicative memory deals with Vansina's recent past – it is “memories shared by the individual with his contemporaries”<sup>26</sup> or “generational memory”. It is alive because it is bound to the living members of the group, and therefore it changes as old members die or go away and are replaced by new ones. One could add to this that memories also change as people change and get older; a fact that Assmann doesn't really touch upon.

On the other hand we have cultural memory, dealing with the distant past. Assmann's definition: “In cultural memory actual history is transformed into remembered history and thus into myth”.<sup>27</sup> Certain events that help define the group, internally and externally, are locked in time and consequently rendered untouchable. Cultural memory is static and unchangeable, as opposed to ever-changing communicative memory.

It is important not to impose our modern notions of “history” and “fiction” on the medieval mind. For people in the Middle Ages, the past was not *either* real *or* fictional. Similarly, Russian philologist M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij talks about “historical” and “artistic” truth respectively in the sagas. He dismisses both as modern anachronisms and instead introduces the term *syncretic* truth as something closer to the medieval perception:

*Syncretic truth* is something lost for ever. It is by no means something between the two other truths. It is far richer and has far greater content than both modern truths. It is fundamentally distinct from both of them. *It is a third entity*.<sup>28</sup>

The historical core of memory is impossible to isolate completely, but that doesn't really matter. What is interesting in this context is *how* the past is portrayed and *why*. Ingimundr's naming of Ram's Fjord in *Vatnsdæla* is an excellent example of syncretic truth. Whether the two rams actually ran down the mountain side or not is irrelevant. The story served a purpose and was consequently “true” to medieval Icelanders – in the syncretic meaning of the word.

<sup>26</sup> Assmann 1992: 50, “Erinnerungen, die der Mensch mit seinen Zeitgenossen teilt”.

<sup>27</sup> Assmann 1992: 52, “Im kulturellen Gedächtnis wird faktische Geschichte in erinnerte und damit in Mythos transformiert”.

<sup>28</sup> Steblin-Kamenskij 1973: 24.

## The form of memory

The above focuses on *what* is remembered – but *how* is it remembered? In Assmann's words, what is the "structure of participation"? The *modus memorandi*? He defines two *modi memorandi*, two ways of transmitting memory.<sup>29</sup>

The *biographical* *modus* deals with the recent past, the property of communicative memory. As mentioned above, all members of the group take part in this memory, so everybody takes part in the transmission of it within the group. This takes place all the time through everyday social interaction, even today – we've all had our grandparents tell us stories about how everything was better when they were young. Even though personal experience is transmitted, this kind of memory is still very much a collective phenomenon.

Correspondingly, the *foundational* memory mode is connected to the distant past and thus cultural memory. Here, what is highlighted is not that which is common and everyday, but the things that make the past different from the present. The past has been given a fixed form: rituals and ceremonies are carried out and formulae are used, even though the original meaning might be lost – which is probably the case more often than not. For that very reason, this kind of memory is not for everyone but handled by specialists (priests, skalds, and the like).

The collective element still comes into play, but only when the specialists share the past with the rest of the group: communal religious ceremonies are carried out; the skalds tell their stories to an audience etc. The actual performance is the property of a select few, but for the memory to make any sense it has to be shared with everyone else.

Assmann sums up his two opposing *modi memorandi* like this:

	<i>Communicative memory</i>	<i>Cultural memory</i>
<i>Content</i>	Personal experience, individual biographies	Events from an "absolute" past
<i>Form</i>	Informal, fluent, "natural", is created through everyday interaction	"Artificial", fixed form, high degree of ceremony and ritual
<i>Media</i>	Living "organic" memory, word of mouth	Fixed symbolism, formulaic in word <u>and</u> deed
<i>Time span</i>	The recent past: a maximum of 80–100 years, 3–4 generations	The distant mythical past, no specific dating
<i>Carriers</i>	Unspecified, potentially all members of the collective	Specialists

<sup>29</sup> Assmann 1992: 51–52.

It should be noted that Assmann dismisses Vansina's concept of a "gap" in history between two distinct periods. Instead he prefers to view it as a slow transition – although, strangely, he does not deal with the transition itself. The schema above should not be seen as representing a strict dichotomy but as the two extremes on a scale. At least in an Old Norse context, this makes perfect sense. For instance, like legendary sagas, both Sagas of Icelanders and contemporary sagas have certain recurring formulas and tropes. The difference is, the Sagas of Icelanders are less formulaic than the legendary ones, and the contemporary sagas even less so. To a 21st century reader, a legendary saga will seem more like a fairy tale, whereas a contemporary saga will read almost like a modern novel, with a Saga of Icelanders being somewhere in between.

If we apply Assmann's concepts to our three-period model above, we get something like this:

<i>Period</i>	The distant past	The "middle period"	The recent past
<i>Memory</i>	Cultural		Communicative
<i>Modus memorandi</i>	Foundational	?	Biographical
<i>Texts</i>	Fornaldarsögur	Íslendingasögur	Samtiðarsögur

We still need to fill in that last box: How is memory transmitted during the transition from the foundational to the biographical mode? And just as importantly: what function does it fill? What is its *purpose*?

### The purpose of memory

We have already touched upon the significance of selection: what is forgotten is no less important than what is remembered.

In order for this premise to work, there has to always be a purpose of memory. It should be noted that not all scholars have shared this view. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss carried on Halbwachs's distinction between static "tradition" and changeable "history" by distinguishing "cold" societies from "hot" ones.<sup>30</sup> Cold

<sup>30</sup> Lévi-Strauss 1962: 233–34.



societies are characterized as static: the notion of “the past” becomes irrelevant because it doesn’t differ from the present. Hot societies, on the other hand, view history as a living, ever-changing organism and therefore focus on how the present relates to the past.

This theory implies that the cold societies are purely oral – and therefore “primitive” – and that the hot literary societies represent a later and more highly evolved stage. None of the stages constitute a “natural” state, however. No society is inherently static – it can only become static, and Lévi-Strauss’ main interest is in the institutions and mechanisms that create either kind of society.

The hot/cold distinction seems quite rigid, mainly because it does not consider the oral tradition at all and makes the existence of writing a more or less necessary prerequisite for live memory. A definition along the lines of Assmann seems much more viable. Written cultures with a high degree of centralization can be just as “cold” toward the past, and Assmann uses ancient Egypt as an example: long lists of pharaohs were compiled and massive monuments built in their honour – but these weren’t really used much as realms of memory. There is nothing to imply that the genealogies were used to legitimize the power of later kings, and no special rituals or any kind of cult surrounding the richly furnished tombs are known – they seem to have just stood there, left untouched by anyone but grave robbers, as soon as the actual burial was over. Perhaps the “showing-off” effect in itself was enough?<sup>31</sup>

Correspondingly, one can find a very active use of history in oral cultures with a horizontal hierarchical structure. The example used in this article is Iceland during the commonwealth, as we shall see below.

In *communicative* memory, the purpose of memory will most often be just as ordinary as the content – and usually closely connected to it. Typically, everyday skills transmitted through learning by doing: a father showing his son how to plough the field, a mother teaching her daughter to cook, etc. Or, less concretely: a grandfather telling his grandchildren about his childhood and the most recent history of the family or the village is giving them a sense of belonging to a group, whether he’s aware of it or not. In both cases, purpose and content are inseparable.

With *cultural* memory, the situation becomes more complicated. Here the specialists control memory, often with quite a high degree of freedom. When dealing with the distant past, no one can prove you a liar because none of the members of the group have any personal memories of that which is being transmitted. More often than not, the original meaning of that memory will be lost as well, giving the special-

<sup>31</sup> Assmann 1992: 70–71.

ists even more freedom to impose their own symbolism on the past, using it to further various agendas of their own.

This use of the past in a specific context Assmann terms “mythomotorics”<sup>32</sup> and exemplifies it through what he calls “the alliance between rule and memory”.<sup>33</sup> Naturally, if there is a monopoly on cultural memory, most often it will belong to the ruling class. The past can have a legitimizing effect: justifying one’s own position of privilege by referring to one’s noble ancestry. The obvious way to do this is through the use of genealogies, and they very much exist in oral cultures as well.<sup>34</sup> This is the *retrospective* aspect of the alliance.

The rulers do not just look backward, however – they also look forward, to a future where they themselves have become past. It is a matter of securing one’s legacy, and again the Egyptian pyramids serve as an example. Even though Assmann hasn’t found any specific use of them as realms of memory, it seems curious to finance a project that huge if not to be remembered, unless it was for purely religious reasons – which could be seen as a kind of memory as well. This forward-looking use of memory is the *prospective* aspect.

The ruling class does not have exclusive rights to the use of the past, though. Other strata of society can use it as well – only not to back up their own power but to undermine that of the rulers. Whereas the rulers use *supportive* mythomotorics to legitimize themselves, others – we might call them “the opposition” – will use *counter-present* mythomotorics.<sup>35</sup> The rulers would argue that since the past has been so glorious, why change anything? – “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it”. The opposition, on the other hand, would claim that everything used to be much better before, so let’s return to that. They both have a positive view of the past – it is their perceptions of the *present* that differ.

All these purposes can be found in an Old Norse context. As mentioned above, Assmann deals extensively with the differences between the distant and the recent past, communicative and cultural memory, but neglects – whether on purpose or not – to go into the transitional phase. Considering Vansina’s anthropologically inspired three-period model, however, the middle period is really the most interesting when trying to determine how societies define themselves through their use of the past. By including the Old Norse source material we can attempt to answer some of the questions that Assmann and Vansina leave open.

<sup>32</sup> Assmann 1992: 80, “Mythomotorik”.

<sup>33</sup> Assmann 1992: 70, “die Allianz zwischen Herrschaft und Gedächtnis”.

<sup>34</sup> See Vansina 1965: 156–57 for contemporary examples from Rwanda and Burundi.

<sup>35</sup> Assmann 1992: 79, “Fundierend” vs. “kontrapräsentisch”.

### The saga as “key myth”

By using Assmann’s theories on the saga material we find both *modi memorandi*: the biographical as well as the foundational modus. The *samtíðarsögur* would then cover the biographical modus as they cover the recent past. The *fornaldarsögur* must be placed slightly outside the model, as they take place in a mythical past, almost outside time – and, more importantly, outside space, in the sense that the stories are not set in Iceland. The focus here, however, is on the *íslendingasögur*. They serve a dual purpose: what Assmann calls the foundational and what we might call a *legitimizing* purpose. At the same time, recalling Halbwachs, they are still a construction of the past, not a flawless transmission.<sup>36</sup> Paraphrasing Clifford Geertz, the sagas become both “models *for* and models *of* reality”.<sup>37</sup> The foundational aspect will only be touched upon lightly here.

All societies need a myth of origin to explain how that society came to be, and these myths are usually some of the most strongly and purely mythical.<sup>38</sup> They frequently involve gods or other supernatural beings in some form, and they take place in unspecified “ancient times”. Often these stories are also told or performed in a religious context.

Based on field studies in Africa, anthropologist Roy Willis has coined the term *key myths* for such stories, reflecting their central role in every society.<sup>39</sup> The universal question “Who are we?” will, almost inevitably, be followed by the question “Where do we come from?” In most so-called “primitive” cultures the key myths have both a cosmological and an “action” aspect<sup>40</sup> – the stories about the origins of the entire cosmos and stories about the origins of the current social order become one.

In the case of Iceland the situation is slightly different and quite unique. Most peoples have been living in the same place for long enough that their actual origin is lost in the mists of time, but the Icelandic society was effectively created from scratch. The island was empty before the first settlers arrived from Norway in the 870s and,

<sup>36</sup> By now it should be obvious that there is no such thing as a flawless transmission, as the past itself is only available in the form of memory and reconstruction.

<sup>37</sup> Geertz 1966: 7–8.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Willis 1976 and 1981: 98–101, who rejects the notion of a strong dichotomy between “myth” and “history”. Rather, he introduces the idea of a continuum, with pure myth at one end, pure history at the other, and “legend” somewhere in between – corresponding quite well with both Vansina’s three periods and Nordal’s three genres.

<sup>39</sup> See Willis 1981: xvii for a presentation of the term, and p. 15 for a specific example from the Fipa tribe in modern-day Tanzania.

<sup>40</sup> Willis 1981: 25 and 98.

judging by medieval sources, thirteenth century Icelanders were very aware that the birth of the nation happened only a few centuries before. Very few peoples can date their origin so precisely, and very few peoples can claim the same complete lack of a mythical past – at least within the borders of their own country.

Of course the Icelanders still had stories explaining the origin of the entire world – preserved today in the Eddic poems – but these myths still don't explain the origin of Icelandic society.

The most detailed and systematic description of the settlement isn't found in the sagas but in *Landnámabók*, probably written down in the early twelfth century. The book describes what we can only suppose are all the original settlers known at the time, the places they settled and their descendants. It is ordered topographically, fjord by fjord, and describes hundreds of realms of memory.

As mentioned, Ari Þorgilsson inn froði is often named as the author or compiler of *Landnámabók*. He was employed by the bishop, and the book must be seen as an attempt to create a complete list of land owners to avoid any doubt concerning ownership – something akin to William the Conqueror and his *Domesday Book* in England – and possibly assert the central role of the church as the highest authority in legal matters. Neither project met with overwhelming success.

*Landnáma* contains much valuable information, much of which can be found in the sagas as well. Both must be based on the same oral tradition and constitute different expressions of the same collective fund of memory. If the main purpose of *Landnáma* was to act as a stabilizer, we must assume that it was fairly true to this memory, since otherwise the effect would be anything but stabilizing.

Unfortunately, this relatively narrow purpose means that a lot of attention is given to the settlement itself and very little to what caused it in the first place. We're told – very briefly – that the vast majority of the settlers came from Norway,<sup>41</sup> but for most of them no satisfactory explanation is given as to why they left or how they ended up in Iceland.<sup>42</sup> All we get is a clearly Christian rhetoric, describing Iceland as empty land with an inherent Christian potential, the settlers being "noble heathens", destined to fulfil this potential. This is obviously a late Christian interpretation of the tradition, telling us nothing about how it was transmitted in collective memory. Other versions of the story are needed, and this is where the sagas come in.

<sup>41</sup> For example *Íslendinga sögur* 1: 24, Þá er Ísland fannst ok byggðist af Nóregi [...].

<sup>42</sup> The conflict between king Haraldr and the chieftains is mentioned, but only in passing and in surprisingly few instances.

Several, but not all, Sagas of Icelanders open with a “Norwegian prologue”, describing the first settlers and often stretching backwards to include the lives of their immediate ancestors in Norway. Another advantage the sagas have over *Landnáma* is the fact that each “prologue” tends to concentrate on one or a couple of families, namely those whose members later become the main protagonists of the saga – and, most importantly, they provide the explanation missing in *Landnáma*: most often the starting point is king Haraldr hárfagri uniting the country and once-powerful local chieftains rebelling against this centralization of power. In the words of Ketil flatnefr to his men at the beginning of *Laxdæla saga*:

I have had to acknowledge the enmity of king Harald toward us. I do not think we can expect any support from him. It seems to me that two options remain: to flee from the country or be killed, each in his stead.<sup>43</sup>

Most of the Sagas of Icelanders deal with one or two families and/or take place in a specific part of Iceland. Despite their limited focus, biographically and geographically, most of these “Norwegian prologues” do have a surprising amount of common features. Beside the unification, a common feature is the description of settlers coming to Iceland only after one or more stops along the way, typically the Faroe and Orkney Islands (as in *Laxdæla* and *Eyrbyggja saga*), or they come to Iceland, leave and come back again before settling permanently.

This kind of travel narrative is a universal phenomenon. All over the world we find examples of key myths describing how a group coming from the outside arrives in an area, disturbs the existing social order and creates a new one – an *exogenous* myth of origin.<sup>44</sup> In Iceland, there was no social order to disturb before the settlers got there. Still, it must have been a natural move to put the Icelandic key myth into the shape of a travel narrative. This way, a connection is made to the old country – and further strengthened by the use of genealogies. In mainland Scandinavia, kings connect their dynasties to prehistoric times by having them founded by gods – Óðinn, Njörðr, Freyr. In Iceland, the chieftains connect their clans to pre-settlement times by recounting their Norwegian origins.

In addition to the ties with Norway, the differences are emphasized as well. The Icelanders may have come from Norway, but Iceland is definitely *not* Norway, and

<sup>43</sup> *Íslendingar sögur* 4: 2, “Sannspurðan hefi ek fjandskap Haralds konungs til vár. Sýnist mér svá, at vér munim eigi þaðan trausts biða. Lítst mér svá sem oss sé tveir kostir gervir, at flýja land eða vera drepnir hverr í sínu rúmi.”

<sup>44</sup> As opposed to the much rarer *endogenous* myth in which the change happens from within. Cf. Willis 1981: 35.

in the key myth, upheaval and significant social change in the Norwegian social order is the direct cause of the emigration. The old, relatively egalitarian tribal society was replaced by a more hierarchical European model. The chieftains who could not or would not accept this change left and went off to create a new society maintaining the old order. Especially in the first half of the thirteenth century, with Iceland on its way to losing its independence, it was even more important to point out this fact.

This should not be seen as “nationalistic” tendencies in the modern sense, though. The general attitude represented in the saga prologues is not particularly anti-Norwegian. The new social order isn’t necessarily bad – it’s just different. There are plenty of examples of Icelanders going to Norway, winning the king’s favour, and going back home. Especially the shorter *þattir* and the sagas about skalds (e.g. *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*) tell the stories of individuals moving more or less smoothly between the two social spheres and two different codes of honour, *traditional* and *courtly* honour.<sup>45</sup> The right of the Norwegians to order their society as they wish is recognized, while at the same time the Icelanders reserve their own right to do the same. The key myth helps define Icelandic society, both through its origin in another society and through the features that set it apart from others: its internal unity as well as its uniqueness (cf. Halbwachs above).

### A third purpose: the legitimizing saga

By medieval standards, Iceland was a relatively egalitarian society characterized by a very horizontal hierarchy. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, this should mean a “cold” society with no greater interest in the past – but this was definitely not the case with Iceland. On the contrary, it was extremely hot: the past was very much used to define the present.

Even though Iceland had such a horizontal hierarchy, it was primarily what might be termed the “upper class” that wrote history – “wrote” in a symbolic as well as a literal sense. The biggest chieftains had the resources to have manuscripts made, and they were the ones with an interest in preserving the current state of affairs, especially when this state began to break down.

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen,<sup>46</sup> among others, has worked with the idea of three major “breaks” in early Icelandic history: the founding ca. 870, the conversion to Christianity in the year 1000, and the end of the commonwealth in 1262–64 when Iceland became a Norwegian colony.

<sup>45</sup> Using terms borrowed from Ferrer 2001: 150, and 2002: 10.

<sup>46</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen 1995: 79.

The third and final of these breaks was underway for at least a couple of generations, and the big powerful clans were trying to secure for themselves the most advantageous position in relation to the Norwegian king – most prominent among them was Snorri Sturluson's family, the Sturlungar, who lend their name to the whole period. This happened, partly on a very literal level through out-and-out civil war, and partly on an ideological level by trying to justify the clan's position of power. This was done by having the already existing oral tradition about one's ancestors fixed in writing.<sup>47</sup>

To use Assmann's terms: for thirteenth century Icelandic chieftains, the *islendingasögur* were retrospective as well as supportive. This is particularly obvious in the institution of the *feud*. Feuds are a major theme in most Sagas of Icelanders and occur in every single one. Now, if we imagine a third purpose or *modus memorandi* in between the foundational and the biographical, namely the purpose of *legitimization*, the feuds would help serve this purpose.

Here, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* shall serve to demonstrate how the Sagas of Icelanders were used as moral – and sometimes even legal, as in the case of *Bandamanna saga* above – *exempla* for how to conduct oneself in 13th century Iceland. This saga in particular very clearly shows us how the past was used as a model for the present – even though it has often been dismissed as atypical. Hermann Pálsson argues that all the Sagas of Icelanders were written by Christians for Christians, and from an obviously Christian point of view.<sup>48</sup> Jesse Byock looks at the function of feuds in the sagas, but sees *Hrafnkels saga* as the exception that proves the rule. It includes elements from European folk tales and is not the expression of a particularly Icelandic tradition, but rather a Christian moral code: "Apparently the sagaman [author] was strongly influenced by Christian teachings".<sup>49</sup>

An early attempt at a more nuanced interpretation of *Hrafnkels saga* was Davíð Erlingsson's article on the ethics of this specific saga, in which he points out the problems in distinguishing so sharply between Christian, "pagan", and universally human

<sup>47</sup> As opposed to Meulengracht Sørensen who claims that "the Sagas of Icelanders contain no ethical or otherwise qualitative comparison of the past and present: The form did not allow such judgment" (1995: 93, *Islændingesagaerne har ingen etiske eller på anden måde kvalitative sammenligninger af fortiden med nutiden: Formen tillod ikke sådanne vurderinger*). There is, however, no reason to assume that the realistic style and the neutral, invisible and anonymous narrator as such would prevent the implicit presence of a certain attitude in the sagas.

<sup>48</sup> Hermann Pálsson 1971: 10.

<sup>49</sup> Byock 1982: 141–42. See also p. 201 for his list of differences between *Hrafnkels saga* and the "typical" Saga of Icelanders.



moral codes.<sup>50</sup> R. D. Fulk called it “a thirteenth-century Christian’s conception of morality in a pre-Conversion World.”<sup>51</sup> This latter view is much more useful when trying to understand what part the sagas played in medieval Iceland.

*Hrafnkels saga* begins with the introduction of the title character and main protagonist who arrives in Iceland with his father as a teenager and works his way up to become a strong yet strict chieftain (ch. 1–3). It is said of him that he

“... was an unrelenting man, but otherwise well-mannered. He forced the men of Jökulsdalr to become his retainers, was lenient and soft towards his own men but harsh and quarrelsome towards the men of Jökulsdalr, and they never got any justice from him. Hrafnkell took part in many duels and gave no man his due, and no one received any compensation from him, no matter what he had done.”<sup>52</sup>

This might not seem a very positive description to our modern standards, but perhaps these were the exact qualities that made Hrafnkell – and great chieftains in general – so great? He may not have treated his opponents very well, but he was good to his own people and generally a well-bred individual.

Hrafnkell is a *goði* or chieftain/priest for Freyr – hence the nickname. He has a horse called Freyfaxi and orders a servant named Einarr to take care of it, giving him specific instructions not to ride the horse. When Einarr rides it anyway, Hrafnkell is forced to kill him (ch. 4–6).

Again, this might seem an unnecessarily violent and brutal reaction, but as Hrafnkell himself says:

“I might even have let this matter pass, had I not sworn not to, and yet you have done right in confessing to me.” But, believing that no harm can come to those who fulfil their vows, he leapt off his horse and dealt him [Einarr] his death-blow.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Davið Erlingsson 1970: 12.

<sup>51</sup> Fulk 1986: 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Íslendinga sögur* 10: 80–81, [...] var ójafnaðarmaður mikill, en mennt vel. Hann þröngdi undir sik Jökulsdalsmönnum til þingmanna hans, var linr og bliðr við sína menn, en stríðr og stirðlyndr við Jökulsdalsmenn, og fengu af honum engan jafnað. Hrafnkell stóð mjök í einvígjum og bætti engan mann fé, því at engi fekk af honum neinar bætr, hvat sem hann gerði.

<sup>53</sup> *Íslendinga sögur* 10: 86–87, “Þar myndar ek hafa gefit þér upp eina sök, ef ek hefði eigi svá mikit um mælt, en þó hefir þú vel við gengit.” En við þann átrúnað, at ekki verði at þeim mönnum, er heitstrengingar fella á sik, þá hljóp hann af baki til hans ok hjó hann banahögg.



Christian ideals such as forgiveness are clearly not applicable here. Hrafnkell has to do what he does to maintain his honour, whether he likes it or not. He is not entirely happy about his deed and offers a sizeable compensation to Einarr's father Þorbjörn – something he would never do under normal circumstances. Þorbjörn refuses to accept it, however, and demands that the matter be settled in court. Hrafnkell flat-out denies, as “that would make you seem like my equal, and this way we can never come to terms.”<sup>54</sup> Again he cannot allow his own social standing to be lowered (ch. 7).

Þorbjörn now talks his nephew Sámur into taking the case of the family against Hrafnkell. Sámur reluctantly agrees, sues Hrafnkell, and goes to the central assembly, the Althing, with his men to gather support – since he is just a regular farmer he needs the help of other chieftains. No one wants any part in the matter, though, and they advise Sámur to just let it go (ch. 8). And what is Hrafnkell's reaction upon hearing this? He finds Sámur's strategy laughable (“hlægilegt”).<sup>55</sup>

By a stroke of luck Sámur now happens upon Þorkell Þjóstarsson, newly returned to Iceland from a seven year stint in the Varangian Guard of the Byzantine emperor. With the help of Þorkell and his brother Þorgeirr, Sámur actually manages to win the case at the Althing and Hrafnkell is sentenced to outlawry (ch. 9–11).

Sámur still is not satisfied. First he stays at the Althing, strutting about as if he owns the place. He then goes to Hrafnkell's farm with his men, literally drags the now former chieftain out of bed and tortures him, despite Hrafnkell's plea:

“It is not dishonourable for me if you kill me. I shall not beg you not to do it, but I ask that you do not mistreat me. In that there is no honour for you.”<sup>56</sup>

Eventually, Sámur strips Hrafnkell of all his possessions but graciously decides to let him live (ch. 12–13). Sámur now moves into Hrafnkell's farm and destroys his temple to Freyr, while Hrafnkell moves to a smaller farm nearby. Over the next six years he succeeds in building a new fortune for himself and ends up being just as powerful as before, if not more so (ch. 14–16).

Finally, Hrafnkell decides to get back at Sámur, even if it takes the egging on of an old woman to get him going again (ch. 17). He rides toward Sámur's farm and on the

<sup>54</sup> *Íslendinga sögur* 10: 88: “Þá þykkist þú jafnmennt mér, ok munum vit ekki at því sættast.”

<sup>55</sup> He uses the word on two occasions (p. 90 and 91).

<sup>56</sup> *Íslendinga sögur* 10: 102: “Þat er mér engi ósæmd, þótt þér drepið mik. Mun ek ekki undan því mælast. Undan hrakningum mælumst ek. Er yðr engi sæmd í því.”

way meets Sámr's brother Eyvindr, returned from abroad. The two sides clash and Eyvindr is killed, along with all his men (ch. 18). Hrafnkell now returns to his old farm, and this time the roles are reversed: Sámr is dragged out of bed and presented with the same ultimatum that he gave to Hrafnkell – to either die or give all his possessions to Hrafnkell and become his inferior (“undirmaðir”). Sámr chooses the latter and the two once again switch places (ch. 19). The sagas ends with both men growing old and dying (ch. 20):

He [Sámr] was never vindicated against Hrafnkell for as long as he lived, but Hrafnkell sat on his farm and kept his reputation.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the story, Hrafnkell probably doesn't strike the average modern reader as particularly sympathetic, and yet he is the one who emerges victorious in the end. There can be no doubt that we, the audience, are supposed to be on his side.

The key word here is *honour*, a central aspect of early Icelandic society,<sup>58</sup> and honour is always on the side of Hrafnkell. When he treats his own people and others mercilessly, he only does what any good chieftain would do. When he kills his thrall over a seemingly harmless mistake, it's not so much that he wants to – but his (traditional) code of honour forces him to do it to avoid losing face.

Sámr, on the other hand, acts without honour. Initially, he only joins the feud against Hrafnkell reluctantly, but once he is in it he doesn't hesitate to break social conventions in order to win it. Rather than trying to get the local court to settle the matter, according to custom, he takes it directly to the Althing. Despite being an ordinary farmer, he claims privileges that are exclusive to chieftains – and as if that wasn't enough: once he wins the case, he has the audacity to gloat about it and to humiliate Hrafnkell further by hurting him physically. Sámr breaks both legal and social conventions, and it can only end one way: his own downfall and the restitution of Hrafnkell.

## Conclusion: the past as a model for the present

As mentioned, the thirteenth century was a tumultuous time in Iceland. Chaos and

<sup>57</sup> *Íslendinga sögur* 10: 116: Fekk hann aldri uppreist móti Hrafnkeli, meðan hann lifði. En Hrafnkell sat í búi sínu ok helt virðingu sinni.

<sup>58</sup> The theme is dealt with extensively by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in his doctoral thesis (1995), especially chapters 9–10, p. 187–248.

warlike conditions were part of everyday life and far from all chieftains played the game by the rules. There was a definite need of both legal and moral examples to help maintain the social order, and the tradition of the Saga Age, with its strong honour code and sense of order, was perfectly suited to fill that role. The past was constructed in a way to work as a model for the present – it became a model of as well as a model for reality.

Very likely the less powerful Icelandic farmers, as opposed to the chieftains, would have used the past in a counter-present manner. Unfortunately for us, they didn't have the same opportunities to fix their version of history in writing – that could have been the basis of some very interesting comparisons.

Considering the Sagas of Icelanders as a whole, they constitute two *modi memo-randi*, fulfil two different purposes. The descriptions of the settlement that open most of these sagas covered the foundational function. At the same time, the sagas work as legal and moral justification: the descriptions of feuds helped justify the current state of affairs, as well as giving the Icelanders a model of how to structure the legal system, how to behave properly in the public sphere – and what would happen to those who didn't.

Bearing this in mind, and combining it with the theories presented above, we can, at least tentatively, fill in another blank spot in our model:

<i>Period</i>	The distant past	The “middle period”	?	The recent past
<i>Islandic parallel</i>	Mythical times (not <u>in</u> Iceland)	The Saga Age (850–1030)		The Age of the Sturlungar (1117–1284)
<i>Sources</i>	(Eddic myths) Fornaldarsögur	Íslendingasögur		Samtiðarsögur
<i>Function</i>	Foundational	Foundational/ legitimizing		Biographical

The remaining caveat is the century or so from the end of the Saga Age to the beginning of the Age of the Sturlungar. Here the model helps point out a significant difference between oral and written tradition. In a purely oral culture, the “floating gap” can only cover a couple of generations. In a literate culture, it might make more sense

to talk about a *fixed gap* with specific boundaries, because the recent past is put down in writing and can stretch back further than its oral counterpart.

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